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A Little Bass Fishing

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Abstract

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A Little Bass Fishing

YOU KNOW, as I look back over the summers, the toughest day were when I had just one guy out. Mornings weren't very good for introductions, what with checking tackle, the motors and the pack. God, that's awful. There's him and you, and you go out on a lake in a little boat. You're very exclusive with a person you don't know.

Anyway this happened on a fine, bright summer day that started out all overcast and cleared off about 8:30 or 9:00.

At 6:30 I'm up by the liars' bench checking my gear, when this big guy with prosperity protruding fore and aft comes up and says, "Look's like rain."

I look at him and smile. He's got on a wool shirt over a sweat shirt with a windbreaker binding over all. "Yeah. It might rain before the day's out."

"S'pose I should take a raincoat?"

"Yeah, you better." He pushes off towards his cabin. On his way he points out his car so I can load the gear in it.

When he comes back he asks me if I'm supposed to guide him. Well, what else d'you do with 'em? I say, "Yeah, how'd you like to try for bass today?"

"Fine, fine, fine." Like I was an out of town guest.

"We'll go to a small bass lake so that we won't need to use the kicker," I say. It's a stinking nuisance anyway. Besides, a half-day lake looks like enough. "The lake shore is high on the south and west sides. Lots of good places for a shore-dinner," I say.

This guy gets in the boat like I'm going to try and dump him before he even gets away from the dock. After he gets his fanny spread over the back seat his confidence is restored.

"Should I start right in?"

"Yeah, put on a deep runner and get your line wet." While he's doing this I notice that the weed beds have come up so you can spot them easily. The wind's out of the south-west putting a nice ripple on the water. I've seen better days for bass, but hell, the day probably won't make much difference. "Ever fish much for bass?"

"No," he says, "well, not since I was a kid." Judas, doesn't anybody fish between the ages of fifteen and forty-five?

"It's mostly casting the shoreline. A little work off deep bars and weed beds, but mostly the shorelines."

"Haven't casted much in the past ten years." He tries to make it sound like two. "Oh, I've been out a few times with my boy, but not really fishing."

There you go, none of these guys realize that fishing is mostly attitude and only some activity. "What did you fish for?"

"Well, we didn't really fish for anything. Guess there were some perch in the lake. The boy caught a sunfish. Nice one, his first fish. Showed it to everybody on the block when we got home. Damned fish stunk by the time he wanted me to clean it."

He isn't casting any more, just dragging the bait behind the boat, and looking around. Lotsa pep. "We'll head in here and hit that shady shore, the wind's blowing to it." I say, "ought to be a few lying in there."

"Okay, anything you say. You're the doctor." Well, hot dog. Nothing like going fishing.

"What bait should I try first?"

"Have you got a yellow hula-popper?"

"Well, let's see." He starts fishing in his tackle box. "You mean this?" He shows me a jitterbug.

"Nope, not that one."

"How's about this?" It's a lazy-ike.

"Nope, that's not it." He starts digging again and catches a hook in his finger. He extracts the hook and sucks his finger for a second.

"Here, I've got one in my box. I brought it along just in case."

"Oh, I've got plenty of baits here." He dives back into his tackle box.

"Go ahead, try this one," I say. The fellow I had out yesterday got four nice ones on it in the afternoon."

"On that one?"

"Yeah, he used it all afternoon."

"Okay. Put'er on." Like I'm reading from the book of Revelations.

"Just chuck it out and let it set for a half a minute. Then bring it in in short jerks."

He starts pushing the bait at the shoreline and reeling in. He does it as though it were something to be memorized.

In about ten minutes it happens. He drops the bait next to an old deadhead. Before he starts his retrieve the water blossoms up where the hula-popper was. It's beautiful. Only he doesn't see it.

"Dammit, got a back — Wasat! My God! I got a fish! Look at him, he's jumpin' again! Look — Goddam. Did you see that? He threw that plug right back at me."

"Yeah, I know, that was a bass." He just sits for a while looking at the bait where the bass threw it and then where he threw it from.

"I never saw anything like that before," he says. That fish got madder than hell." He winds up the slack line. When he gets the plug in he grabs it and looks close to see if there are any teeth marks. All of a sudden he looks at me. "You suppose he'll be back today?"

"You never know, but you won't find out without your bait in the water." I smile at the guy. He gets the point and starts pitching again. The sun comes out bright, and he keeps pitching. He takes off his wool shirt and then his sweat shirt.

At lunch time we don't even bother with coffee. "Got to hurry up and get back out there," he says. There's already a froth on the lake, but he's raring for more.

By the middle of the afternoon we've been around the lake almost twice. He's starting to slow down a bit. He's really red where his T-shirt isn't. His other end must be giving him hell because he keeps shifting to rest one side then the other.

I'm starting to feel a little sorry for the guy's wife. If he stays out much longer she's going to have a basket case on her hands. "The sun starting to bother your arms?"

"Feels great!" Out goes the bait again without a pause. Campbell Soup has been looking for that red since color photography. He figures I'm looking at him, because he says, "Always get red first, then turns brown." Yeah, just like the steaks I get down at the pick-your-steak-and-watch-'em-cook-it-joint.

I pour a lid of water from the thermos while he's reeling in. "How 'bout a shot of water?" I'm hoping it'll break up

his mental activity a little. He brings the plug to the side of the boat and lays his pole in his lap.

"Why yes, thanks," he sounds like it might be a new possibility for the stuff.

The water's just starting to trickle down his muzzle 'cause his mouth isn't as big as his thirst, when there's a hell of a splash beside the boat. He pounces on the pole after it jumps once and there goes the top to my new thermos. Well, he makes a stab at the reel and that old crank starts chewing on his kunckles like a dull circular saw. I spin the boat so the line won't fray. Figure it's a Northern. They always run under the boat.

"Don't grab that handle! Thumb the spool. He'll snap the line!"

"Christ almighty. He's takin' all my line!"

"*God dammit! Do what I tell you!*"

Well, he looks at me like he knows where I can stick my head. Then this big pig comes up arched clear out of the water. Really dancing.

"Now! Try and turn 'em!" He starts cranking and I start to row like hell. All of a sudden that lunker's coming faster than we can row and crank. When he sees us, away he goes again. The second time we get him up by the boat I rap his noggin with the edge of the oar. He takes off sulking. So we haul him around the lake for a while. Finally I head in for a sandy beach on the east side of the lake. As soon as the bow touches, I jump over up to my knees and start rapping this toothy devil toward shore with an oar.

Then the big guy starts to get out of the boat, only his legs are spoiled and he falls right on his gut. His rod gets the deep six. He tries to get up. He sees me and that big damn fish slapping at each other and then he's down again.

Well, I roll a big rock onto the Northern's tail and go over to look in the boat. When I slosh over, this guy looks up. He's shaking the boat laughing, "You're a hell of a guide," he hollers. "You said we were going for bass."

What the hell can you do? If the weather doesn't make a liar out of you the damn fish will.

—Tom Caulfield

